From:	Christy Agner
To:	Ben Pendry; Chris Williams; Kelli Brown; Kyle Pifer; Melissa Wargo; Mike Byers; Rich Price; Richard Starnes; Sam Miller; Shea Browning; William Moultrie
Subject:	NC Tribune + partner news, Week of January 26-30, 2026
Date:	Friday, January 30, 2026 3:44:00 PM
Attachments:	Weekly Federal Recap for January 30 2026.msg

Team, please see the NC Tribune + partner news for the week of January 26 – 30. This week's less exciting tidbit is that Congress did not finalize the remaining appropriations bills by the expiration of tonight's continuing budget resolution, thus we will have a (hopefully, brief) partial government shutdown. This week's more exciting tidbit is that the NC Department of Revenue has opened the individual income tax filing season. Taxes fund NC Promise! Tuition plan?! Happy snow day/tax preparation weekend to us - Enjoy, Christy

Federal Agencies

- Department of Education Publishes Rulemaking Setting New Limits on Students Loans and Creating New Definitions for Graduate and Professional Students The U.S. Department of Education (the Department) today issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) aimed at reducing the cost of higher education and simplifying federal student loan repayment (related to the RISE negotiated rulemaking committee - graduate and professional program definitions, among other student aid issues such as the elimination of GRAD plus). The NPRM is scheduled for publication tomorrow, with a 30-day comment period that ends March 2.

  Politico coverage '*The department is rolling back a loan program, known as Grad Plus, that allows students to borrow up to the cost of attendance for graduate school. Borrowers already enrolled in this program will be grandfathered in, but the department will no longer accept new applications in July*.'

- AHEAD Consensus Agreement Also Expected Anticipating a Federal Register issuance of notice for the two AHEAD negotiated reg sessions, below are summary memos outlining the results of those sessions (from APLU) . The first session wrapped in December, with the committee reaching consensus on proposed regulations on the packaging Pell and Workforce Pell provisions of HR1. In early January 2026, the second session also reached consensus on a package of proposed regulations on the accountability provisions of the law. APLU is socializing these documents as a resource once NPRMs come out and institutions consider submitting a response.

  Memo on AHEAD – Packaging Pell and Workforce Pell
  Memo on AHEAD – Accountability Provisions

- Education Department Launches New Rulemaking Session on Accreditation. The department is creating the Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization, or AIM, Committee and is seeking nominations to serve on the negotiating committee. The committee will meet in person for two sessions on April 13-17 and May 18-22.

Congress

- A partial government shutdown will occur on January 30, as the CR expires. Six areas of appropriations remain unfunded as Congress disagrees on the appropriations bill for Homeland Security. The areas include Labor-HHS-Education and DOD.
- GOP Senators Investigate Education Funding Fraud. According to the Dept. of Education, there has been fraud in the spending of federal funds, including on education programs, specific to AI bots disguised as students and missed corrections over now deceased students.
- WCU hosted new Western Field Rep Reagan Bunch for a campus tour this week. Reagan is a 2023 graduate of UNCW and Clay County native. Congressman Edwards office hosted Mobile constituent hours in Sylva on Wednesday.
- WCU is seeking Hill meetings with Congressional delegation members for Feb. 11 for the UNC institutions with Engineering schools. Dean Randy Collins is leading the delegation from WCU, and NC.

State Agencies

- NC DPI announced nine Teacher of the Year nominations for 2025 were released, including Macon County and WCU alum *Nishelle Henson*, math instructor at Macon Middle School (Macon County Schools). WCU has two alums in the previously announced 'Beginning Teacher of the Year' program.
- State Health Plan Board approved 1st phase of the Preferred Provider Strategy with three clinically integrated networks (CINs): Aledade, Community Care Physician Network and UNC Health Alliance. According to the release, There are approximately 4,500 providers throughout North Carolina in these CINs. This presentation to the Board indicates 'primary locations of the preferred provider network – see Slide 5. Despite showing locations on the map, media coverage of the meeting indicates a coverage gap in Haywood County. This map shows no participants in Madison County, but at least one in our 16 county region.
- NC Debt Affordability Advisory Committee adopts report updating the state's borrowing capacity, concluding the state has sufficient debt capacity to borrow nearly $2 billion in each of the next 10 years for capital projects and $155 million annually for transportation projects. The study determined the General Fund debt capacity is $11.68 billion in 2026, or $1.93 billion annually if spread equally over the next 10 years. The Highway Trust Fund debt capacity is $920 million in 2026, or $155 million if spread in equal amounts over the next 10 years. If no further debt is authorized, the state's General Fund debt service will decline more than 85% over the next 10 years and will be eliminated by June 30, 2039.
- NC Retirement Systems Board voted to modify policies intended to make it easier to give retirees a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) in their monthly benefit payments, effective in the fiscal year beginning in 2027. BOT voted to recommend legislative approval of

employer contribution rates for the fiscal year ending in 2027, for state government agencies providing employee pensions through the Department of State Treasurer. The recommended rates are: TSERS, 17.49% of employee compensation. The TSERS board further voted to recommend benefit increases in the Disability Income Plan of North Carolina , but only if the General Assembly passes an across-the-board salary increase for state employees, and using the same percentage.

- Promotion of the America250 commemoration in 2026 has begun at the state level. DNCR has a web feature allowing events to be populated on its website for public search opportunities. The promotion from the Governor's office is here.

NCGA – there were no meetings this week. Rep. Karl Gillespie was in Sylva to bring comments to a broadband and digital access meeting held at SCC. WCU IT professionals and I attended the session.
I am watching bill filings and budget proposals from other state legislatures currently in session (almost all Southern states except NC), including state proposed participation in the scholarship federal tax credit up to $1700 annually. Several states are considering large reduction in higher education public funding. (example, Utah at $94m, on top of previous years cuts). Decreases also proposed or passed in California, Indiana & Washington.

Statewide News

State Health Plan rolls out first "preferred providers" State Health Plan trustees have approved "preferred provider" contracts with the clinic networks of **UNC Health** and two other groups, State Treasurer Brad Briner's office says. The move is part of the plan's **cost-control strategy** and addresses the primary care needs of its members. Follow-on decisions will address speciality, maternity and dermatological care, and independent pharmacies. In essence, the plan's trying to steer members toward medical practices that promise low-cost care and get them to avoid going to higher-priced emergency departments and urgent-care clinics. Plan administrators are promising members will see low co-pays, the removal of prior-authorizations controls and other benefits if they use the favored clinics. The idea is "bending the cost curve in a way that aims to protect our members," Briner said. Along with the UNC Health Alliance, the plan's signing on with Maryland-based **Aledade** and the Garner-based **Community Care Physician Network**. The combination includes practices in the vast majority of North Carolina's 100 counties, some exceptions being Madison, Gates, Currituck and Jones counties. Briner said that in choosing partners, plan officials focused on "solving for distance from our members," not necessarily for county by county presence. The UNC Health Alliance says its network covers 53 counties and includes 1,810 primary care providers. It has the Triangle, Down East and much of the west covered, but not the northeast, Outer Banks or the outlying counties of the Charlotte area. Aledade says its network includes 210 primary care practices and 20 community health centers. Members include such practices as Asheville's **Trillium Family Medicine** and Henderson's **Vance Family Medicine**. Community Care's physician network takes in 429 practice groups scattered across much of the state. It has a few geographic gaps, among them Haywood and Transylvania counties in the west and

Hyde County on the coast.

Carolina Journal 'A group seeking COVID-related records from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is urging the North Carolina Supreme Court to take its case. Lower courts have ruled against the group US Right to Know. Courts have accepted UNC-CH's interpretation of a university research exemption in North Carolina's public records law

AssemblyNC featured a story about an alum, identifying them as a WCU alum and providing context from the alums time at WCU, specifically in ROTC. Author, Jim Morrill, previously with the Charlotte Observer.

Higher Education News

Some NC professors fear new 'academic freedom' policy will censor faculty Brianna Atkinson/WUNC News The UNC Board of Governors is moving forward on adopting a system-wide definition of academic freedom. According to System officials the proposal "fills out a gap" in UNC BOG policies, which have long mentioned academic freedom without defining it. But some faculty members say the "lengthy and vague" policy is a threat to academic freedom in itself and fear it can be used to retaliate against professors who teach unpopular subjects. The UNC System's proposal defines academic freedom as a principle that "protects the rights of all faculty to engage in teaching, research/creative activities service, and scholarly inquiry without undue influence" and "ensures that faculty can freely pursue knowledge; express, discuss and debate ideas; and contribute to knowledge and understanding related to their areas of expertise." That definition comes with several "parameters" ranging from requiring professors to keep lessons involving controversial ideas related to their subject matter, to ensuring "faculty activities" support their university's mission and follow accreditation standards. **[Read more here]**

Charges dismissed in controversial UNCG arrests. School doesn't halt student disciplinary action. Kate Denning/Carolina Public Press Criminal charges against a UNC-Greensboro student, Alisia Rea, 22, and her partner Quinten Thomas, 24, were dismissed Wednesday. The charges were issued in October after UNCG Police stopped Thomas for a traffic violation, though the situation turned physical when officers grabbed and cursed at Thomas for not exiting the vehicle when told and kneeled on top of Rea in an attempt to arrest her. Several bystanders filmed the altercation, and the footage quickly gained attention on social media. The university chapter of the NAACP criticized the officers at the time for police brutality against Rea and Thomas, who are both Black. Rea was charged with resisting a public officer and assault on a government official and Thomas with resisting a public officer, driving with a revoked license and stopping on a highway. Rea's attorney Dominique Erney from the Southern Coalition for Social Justice applauded the dismissal of the charges. **[Read more here]**

Op/Ed: Time to Rein in the College Athletics Spending Spree: *(This is an op/ed by N.C. State Senator Tim Moffitt, whose district includes Henderson, Polk and Rutherford counties.)*

(Moffitt served in the N.C. House from 2010 to 2015, then 2021 to 2022. That year, he was elected to the N.C. Senate. He won a second term in 2024. He is a management consultant.)

ByBusinessNC 01/25/2026

As a state senator representing the hardworking people of North Carolina, I've always believed in the value of college sports. They've brought pride to our communities, boosted our economy, and enriched the educational experience at our universities. From the roar of the crowd at Appalachian State when they slay a football giant to the excitement of basketball in Wilmington, athletics have been a unifying force. But let's be honest: the spending in college athletics has spiraled out of control, turning what should be a sustainable pursuit into an unsustainable arms race. Our universities are locked in a never-ending competition to outspend one another — building lavish facilities, offering multimillion-dollar coaching contracts, and now, with name, image, and likeness deals, paying players sums that rival professional salaries.

This isn't just about keeping up; it's an unquenchable thirst for "more" that permeates higher education, but hits hardest in athletics. The result? The average North Carolinian, the blue-collar worker who pays taxes and cheers from afar, is priced out. Tickets to games at our flagship universities are unaffordable for most families, and even if you can scrape together the money, good luck getting seats—wealthy donors have locked in lifetime rights, turning public institutions into exclusive clubs. I have no issue with donors shelling out millions to enjoy the thrill of victory. That's their prerogative in a free market. But it's not the role of the taxpayer — the mechanic in Asheville, the teacher in Greensboro, or the farmer in the East — to subsidize this extravagance. And now, with players entering the millionaire class, the burden grows heavier.

Our state has real, pressing needs that demand every dollar: rebuilding after devastating hurricanes and floods, properly providing appropriate levels of health care, repairing crumbling roads and bridges, addressing overcrowding in our prisons. In the wake of recent disasters that have left families homeless and communities shattered, the idea of diverting more tax dollars to college sports isn't just misguided — it's irresponsible. Where does this end? Trees don't grow to the sky, and neither should our public funding for what is essentially entertainment. Universities argue they must spend to stay competitive, and I get that. But competitiveness in sports is their institutional priority, not a basic human need like education, safety, or infrastructure. It's certainly not a core service that should be propped up by taxpayer money. We've seen this play out across the country: escalating costs lead to higher tuition, bigger deficits, and ultimately, a system that benefits the elite while squeezing everyone else. It's time for our universities to get creative and look inward. Monetize through innovative partnerships, enhanced broadcasting deals, or alumni-driven initiatives that don't rely on the public purse. Encourage donors to fund your new ideas. I can not, in good conscience, vote for anything that forcefully takes more money from our working families to fund this largess. North Carolina's institutions are world-class; they can lead by example in fiscal responsibility, ensuring sports remain a boon, not a burden. In these challenging times, let's prioritize the needs of all North Carolinians over the wants of a few. Our state deserves better than an endless spending spiral — it's time to call a timeout on taxpayer-funded excess in college athletics.

What is academic freedom, anyway? The UNC Board of Governors, which consists of 24 politically appointed members, is responsible for the overarching UNC System. Because of the weather, the board is meeting virtually this week to discuss, among other things, a definition of **academic freedom.** The concept has been a lightning rod as of late, from the Trump administration's crackdown on diversity initiatives to the assassination of Charlie Kirk to major federal funding cuts and high-profile firings over classroom content. Here's the definition board members are considering, according to a meeting agenda: "Academic freedom is the foundational principle that protects the rights of all faculty to engage in teaching, research/creative activities, service, and scholarly inquiry without undue influence. It ensures that faculty can freely pursue knowledge; express, discuss and debate ideas; and contribute to knowledge and understanding related to their areas of expertise." This term is already all over UNC system policy, and is "essential to the university's mission," yet has no comprehensive definition. What does it actually protect? Or more importantly, what does it leave out? "Academic freedom is not absolute," reads the Board of Governors' proposal. It does not include:

- "Teaching content clearly unrelated to the course description or unrelated to the discipline or subject matter."
- "Using university resources for political or ideological advocacy in violation of university policy."
- "Refusing to comply with institutional policies or accreditation standards to which the university is subject."

The new definition also explicitly protects students' right to disagree with concepts and theories they hear in class or from faculty outside of class. The board will also discuss measures to promote civil discourse on campuses.

95% of college faculty fear student overreliance on AI Meanwhile, the threat of **artificial intelligence** to academic integrity continues to loom large. A study conducted by **Elon University** showed that faculty are very anxious about it. Most faculty respondents believe AI will diminish students' critical thinking and attention spans, and believe cheating is more prevalent than ever. Students' research practices have gotten worse, and so too may the value of academic degrees, the survey concluded. I'm really curious about if it's possible for generative AI *not* to be the worst thing that ever happened to college campuses, so if you see examples of benefits, let me know. I suspect that smart teens and young adults are using it in ways that might actually be pretty interesting. **Number crunching** After reviewing the Board of Governors committee agendas for interesting facts and figures, here are some that stood out to me:

- **3%**: the tuition increase most UNC institutions are proposing for in-state students. If you're coming from out-of-state, the number is more like 10%. That is, unless you're eyeing one of the NC Promise schools (Elizabeth City State University, Fayetteville State University, UNC Pembroke and Western Carolina University). For out-of-state students, tuition will rise by as much as 40% under state law.

324: the number of graduates of the UNC Teaching Fellows program who are currently teaching in NC public schools.

- **24 out of 674:** the number of tenured faculty reviewed in 2024-25 who failed to meet expectations. Seven of those faculty members teach at NC State.
- **72,000:** the total number of beds for students living on campus in the UNC system. Those beds are at 101% capacity. NC Central, NC State, UNC and UNC Charlotte are seeking debt authorization for major housing projects.

Only one of the UNC System's 16 universities — Winston-Salem State — wants to continue holding the line on in-state undergraduate tuition heading into the 2026-27 academic year. Thirteen others have proposed 3% increases in line with the signals the system Board of Governors and state legislators have sent in favoring of lifting the *de facto* freeze on in-state tuition that's been in place since 2017. The remaining two — Appalachian State and UNC Asheville — have proposed increases of 2.5% and 1.5% respectively, **according to** system officials. BOG members are scheduled to weigh the requests later this week, with action on them to follow in February. The board also's supposed to review and eventually approve student-fee packages for each of the campuses. These include the student athletics fee, which subsidizes intercollegiate sports program at 15 of the universities, the exemption being the UNC School of the Arts. App State and UNC Pembroke are the only two institutions seeking increases. System flagships UNC Chapel Hill and NC State charge students an unusually low athletics fee of $279 and $232, respectively. That's largely a factor of their football and basketball TV revenue. The other 13 institutions with an athletics fee have levies ranging from East Carolina's $773 to UNC Asheville's $906. If the BOG approves the App and Pembroke proposals, the systemwide average athletics fee will rise half a percent, to $765.

UNC Asheville used weather balloon to help collect data for Winter Storm Fern Jose Sandoval/WFAE Radio As Western North Carolinians braced for an incoming winter storm last week, professor Doug Miller and his students in the University of North Carolina Asheville's Department of Atmospheric Sciences weighed a key question: Should they deploy the weather balloon? Forecasts from the National Weather Service last week showed a high likelihood that a significant winter storm would hit the region, with precipitation ranging from snow to freezing rain and ice that could create dangerous conditions. Given those early predictions, it was no a brainer for Miller and his crew to launch the balloon to collect atmospheric data. "When we see a storm that's going to be rather long-lived or have the potential of creating quite a lot of precipitation — and also, if there's a lot of uncertainty as to what the form of that precipitation is going to be — that's pretty much going to trigger our, 'Yes. Let's do this,'" Miller said in an interview with BPR. **[Read more here]**

UNC System schools are mostly sticking to the position that the details of the name, image and likeness programs they use to pay their athletes aren't up for public discussion. Spokespeople for UNC Chapel Hill, NC State and East Carolina University both responded to recent *Business North Carolina* queries by declining to disclose data about their fundraising

for their NIL programs. “I have reached out to our administration as well as compliance office and have been told that this data is not to be shared and will remain private within our athletic institution,” said Malcolm Gray, ECU’s assistant athletic director for media relations. At UNC Chapel Hill, Senior Associate Athletic Director Steve Kirschner likewise said the university doesn’t discuss its NIL program. Officials at Appalachian State as of Wednesday hadn’t responded to BNC’s queries. But at UNC Charlotte, officials are acknowledging that a fundraiser for the school’s football program met only about three-quarters of its target. The so-called “**Fuel the Future**” crowdfunding campaign sought to raise $5 million ahead of this month’s player-transfer portal. It closed having raised just over $3.8 million, athletics spokesman Joe Templin said, confirming a figure the *Charlotte Business Journal* reported in connection with UNCC’s ongoing search for a new athletics director. The publication interviewed Chancellor Sharon Gaber for the piece. She said she envisions running similar fundraisers in the future and that she’s looking for AD candidates with “experience generating new revenue.” Meanwhile, Duke University’s now-settled lawsuit with **departing** quarterback Darian Mensah put most of the details of its NIL contract with him into the **public record**. Critically, this included the deal’s stipulation that Mensah would “not be deemed an employee, agent, partner or joint venturer of Duke for any purpose whatsoever.” North Carolina law ordinarily makes the details of **state-employee contracts** public record. These include coaching contracts such as UNC Chapel Hill’s deal with head football coach **Bill Belichick**. Student records, on the other hand, fall under the partial protection of federal privacy law. State legislators and Gov. Josh Stein also acted last summer, unanimously, to **exempt NIL contracts** from North Carolina’s Public Records Law. Beyond that, universities like UNC Chapel Hill have long used nonprofits like the Rams Club and the North Carolina Hall of Fame to raise money for athletics. These file Form 990s with the IRS each year that provide some information. The most recent of these that are available cover fiscal 2023-24. That year, the **Rams Club** reported $76.5 million in revenue. The **Hall of Fame** — which Chapel Hill AD Bubba Cunningham has **publicly identified** as one of his school’s NIL collectives — reported $6.2 million in revenue, a 192% increase year on year. It's paid out $3.6 million in “royalties,” a 465% increase year on year.

Protect Ours.’ NC A&T students take the wheel on early voting. Sarah Michels/Carolina Public Press A NC A&T student came up to county elections board Democrat Carolyn Bunker in tears after the North Carolina State Board of Elections’ January meeting. The board had just voted 3-2 to exclude two Guilford County college campuses from early voting primary plans. Unlike many of her fellow students, the student had a car. She told Bunker she felt pressure to drive her friends, her friends’ friends and her classmates to the polls — all while trying to balance schoolwork and a job. Election boards shouldn’t put that burden on anyone, Bunker told Carolina Public Press. But at North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, the largest HBCU in the nation, a group of students are shouldering it proudly. Juniors Terrence Olu Rouse and Shia Rozier recently launched Protect Ours, a movement to get students from campus to the polls this March. Since 2004, the NC A&T site has been used for presidential general elections, according to data provided by Guilford County elections director Charlie Collicut. **[Read more here]**

UNC Asheville Awarded $839,890.00 Grant from Dogwood Health Trust for Research to Improve Health Outcomes in Western North Carolina A substantial investment, the two-year grant will enable the NC Center for Health and Wellness (NCCHW) at UNC Asheville to conduct rigorous research related to HPRC's four focus areas: mental health, substance use, housing, and food security. Established in 2024 through a prior grant from DHT, the consortium includes partners from Appalachian State, East Tennessee State University, Western Carolina University and the Western North Carolina Health Network.....Research focus areas were selected collaboratively by the member institutions of the Health Policy Research Consortium with input from a community advisory committee and based on data from the WNC Community Health Assessment, a regional survey that is conducted every three years and coordinated by HPRC member organization WNC Health Network. UNCA's award activities will be led by the NC Center for Health and Wellness (NCCHW) and will support research focused on:

- Outcomes of select social interventions such as the Healthy Opportunities Pilot for Medicaid enrollees and systems, including after service discontinuation;
- Multi-level impacts of local food share markets and potential for model policies;
- A comparative analysis of affordable housing policy options in Buncombe County;
- Regional policy-driven solutions to improve health, including mental health outcomes; and
- Effects of varying levels of funded time in recovery housing on individual-level engagement and outcomes.

The grant will fund project staff time, partnerships with community organizations, student and faculty involvement and dissemination of research findings. UNC Asheville's efforts in the consortium are led by Emma Olson, MPH, MSW, Interim Executive Director and Associate Director of the NC Center for Health and Wellness; Alex Mitchell, MPH, NCCHW's Culture of Results Senior Project Manager; and Dr. Ameena Batada, Professor of Health Sciences and Faculty Consultant with NCCHW. Additional faculty include Dr. Aubri Rote, the Chair of the Health Sciences Department, Dr. Kedai Cheng of the Mathematics Department, and Dr. Melissa Mahoney of the Economics Department as well as additional faculty in the second year focused on emergent projects. Over twenty five students will be engaged including undergraduates and those in the Master of Public Health program and new Master of Science in Environmental Resilience program. For more information about the NC Center for Health and Wellness, visit https://ncchw.unca.edu/.
in 16 NCAA Division I Teams in the Big South Conference. For more information, please visit: www.unca.edu. **About HPRC** Established in 2024, the Health Policy Research Consortium (HPRC) works collaboratively to develop and implement a shared research agenda addressing factors that influence health in WNC. The Dogwood Health Trust launched HPRC to better understand and respond to the needs of people and communities in Western North Carolina. At UNC Asheville, HPRC works in close collaboration with the WNC Health Policy Initiative (HPI), hosted by the North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness (NCCHW), to coordinate research and sharing opportunities that can inform policies and improve health.

HPRC also works in alignment with NCCHW's Culture of Results (CoR)Initiative by conducting rigorous, community informed research.

Carolina Journal:College Democrats sue over Guilford, Jackson county early voting sites
Excerpt[The complaint about not locating an early voting site on the Western Carolina University (WCU) campus in Cullowhee is at least potentially more legitimate. The county hosted early voting sites for midterm primaries both there and at the nearby Jackson County Recreation Center in both 2022 and 2018. Cullowhee was the only community in Jackson County to have two sites. The county had early voting sites at both locations in Cullowhee in the 2018 and 2022 midterm primaries. Three other sites are widely distributed across the county. As seen in the chart below from Voter Tracker, the WCU site was the second-least used in Jackson County in the **2024 primary**. The proportion of votes at the WCU site was much lower in the **2022 midterm primary**, but that election was held in May, which conflicted with exams and the end of the semester.....Early voting sites cost county election boards money. While there is disagreement about the exact amount, both Democrats and Republicans on the Jackson County Board of Elections **agree** that they would save between $6,000 and $20,000 by operating four sites instead of five. Operating four sites instead of five would also allow election officials to avoid spreading their staff too thin. Jackson County board members have also expressed concern about access to the WCU site for voters not affiliated with the university....o, why not close the Qualla Community Building site? While that location serves the fewest voters, it is in a relatively isolated corner of the county (as is the Cashiers site, which serves communities in the far southern portion of the county). In addition, as the name implies, it is within the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. Forty-one of the 55 Native American Jackson County voters who voted early used the Qualla Community Building, making that site politically untouchable. Tellingly, one of the plans proposed by the Democrats on the Jackson County board called for keeping the WCU site but eliminating the site at the Cullowhee Recreation Center. That recommendation came despite the site consistently being the second-most popular midterm primary site after the county board of elections office.

Regional News

NC's epidemiologist says state's measles cases are "embers" from SC outbreak's "fire"
Adam Wagner/NC Newsroom North Carolina has reported more measles cases since December than it did between 2014 and 2025, with patients largely testing positive in parts of the state where vaccination rates are slumping. Speaking to reporters on a webinar Wednesday, Zack Moore, the N.C. Department of Health and Human Service's chief epidemiologist, linked many of the cases with an ongoing outbreak around Spartanburg, South Carolina. That outbreak has resulted in more than 500 people testing positive for the highly infectious disease. "Embers from that fire in the South Carolina outbreak have started landing here in North Carolina, and unfortunately we have a lot of dry tinder, meaning that we have communities with low vaccination coverage rates," Moore said on a webinar hosted by the Better Cities Health Coalition. Of the 11 people who have tested positive for measles so far in North Carolina, nine are located in western North Carolina. Last week, a pair of people tested

positive in Cabarrus County, easily the furthest east. **[Read more here]**

AdventHealth Hospice Applies to Bring Home-Based Services to Haywood County Jan 27, 2026 03:43PM ● By WNC Business Families in Haywood County deserve compassionate, whole-person hospice care that supports physical, emotional and spiritual needs. AdventHealth will respond to this calling with a Certificate of Need (CON) application to bring AdventHealth Hospice home-based services to Haywood County. "If approved, AdventHealth Hospice will provide comfort-focused, end-of-life care wherever patients call home," said Mark Wheeler, CFO of AdventHealth Home Services. "Our goal is to ensure dignity, compassion and meaningful support when patients and families need it most. .. That commitment has included more than a decade of providing cancer care to patients in Haywood County and surrounding communities, along with the more recent addition of orthopedic services through AdventHealth | Southeastern Orthopedics and Spine at Haywood*. AdventHealth will host a community listening session on Tuesday, Feb. 3, from 4:30 to 6 pm at the AdventHealth Medical Group Radiation Oncology at Clyde Open House, located at 49 Spicewood Drive, Clyde, N.C. 28721. Members of the AdventHealth Hospice team will be onsite to share the organization's vision for expanding home-based hospice services in Western North Carolina and to hear directly from community members about their needs, experiences and priorities. *Source: AdventHealth*

29 counties unite to support Blue Ridge Parkway future Smoky Mountain News The boards of county commissioners and county supervisors in the 17 counties in North Carolina and 12 counties in Virginia that host the Blue Ridge Parkway have passed resolutions of support calling for funding to repair the national park and implement the Blue Ridge Rising Action Plan. On Jan. 12, Yancey County in North Carolina became the 29th county in the national park's corridor to adopt the resolution.
Through Blue Ridge Rising, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation is working with a wide variety of partners representing tourism, economic development, education, workforce training, natural resource conservation, cultural heritage, nonprofits and government agencies to implement strategies that unite the region. The Blue Ridge Rising Action Plan, created through more than three dozen local and re-gional listening sessions, marks the first time in the national park's history that these counties are working together to implement travel, tourism and outdoor recreation strategies that will have wide-ranging benefits throughout the parkway corridor. **[Read more here]**

Waynesville goes solar on town building Andrew Marshall/The Waynesville Mountaineer The town of Waynesville is moving forward with plans to install solar panels and solar energy battery storage to its public works building. The project, funded primarily through a grant from the Dogwood Health Trust for almost $500,000, will create a resilient disaster response hub for Waynesville during natural disasters, as well as save significant money, town officials said. "Water, streets, sewer, electric, all those need to stay functioning during these extreme weather events. And this allows a command center that will help do that, and will work along with the county command center," said Chuck Dickson, who sits on the Waynesville Town

Council as well as Waynesville's Environmental Sustainability Board. In the event of a disaster, the building "would have at least 24 hours of power, and the next day, solar would kick on and it would cover operations, and then it would also replenish the battery from the previous night's usage," said William Hite, the chair of Waynesville's Environmental Sustainability Board. **[Read more here]**